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ABSTRACT

In order to help students grasp Henry David Thoreau's concepts more easily, his writing can be divided into four main themes: simplicity, love of nature, following one's dreams, and following one's conscience. Once students have a general understanding of Thoreau's ideas, they can engage in many activities to express that understanding: write about the places that for them are like Walden, compare contemporary songs such as Madonna's "Material Girl" to Thoreau's ideas, build a scale model of Thoreau's house, spend time alone on a walk in the woods, or read related literary works such as "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail." The most successful writing exercise has students choose one of Thoreau's quotations, explain the quotation, give an example from life to support the quotation, give an example of a literary work or character that demonstrates the same idea as the quotation, and finally, explain the value of the main idea to society and to their personal lives. (An example of the final writing exercise is provided.) (SRT)

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Taking Thoreau's Boulders Into the Classroom

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David Barto February 10, 1986

Taking Thoreau's Boulders Into the Classroom

Henry David Thoreau wanted his words to "lie like boulders on the page." Most students who read his Walden and "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," in particular, are afraid that he has succeeded. They have found that trying to budge those boulders is not worth the effort. Admittedly, Thoreau's prose is tough going, but there are ways to break down those boulders to size that young people can handle.

The following teaching ideas come from my fourteen years of high school classroom experience and from talking to teachers around the United States as I've travelled the last two years to high schools and colleges with my one-man Thoreau visit, a portrayal that evolved out of my own frustration to make Thoreau live for my students. I have also spoken with many during my summer performances at Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau has much to offer our students, and the effort to cut his words down to size is well worth it. Thoreau rightly takes more places on required reading lists in our schools each year.

I have found my approach to Thoreau much easier when I break his work down into four main themes: simplicity, love of nature, following one's dreams, and following one's conscience. Introducing his work this way helps students to wade through his words and to more easily grasp his concepts.

Thoreau himself cautioned that he was not calling men and women away to the woods, as if Walden were the only answer to life. It makes sense, then, that a place of quiet reflection, of security, may be found elsewhere. After discussing Thoreau's retreat, and the purpose of it, direct students to write about their own Waldens. Is it a bedroom or

an attic or basement space? Is it out of doors or in a certain state of mind the student can find often? Why is it important to have such a retreat? At what sort of time does such a place become a necessity? Tie in the loss of Thoreau's beloved brother John, and of the deaths of little Waldo Emerson and his Harvard roomate, Charles Stearns Wheeler, soon after. There is also the matter of his tuberculosis because of which he had already lost a semester at Harvard, and been otherwise affected. How did such life circumstances make a Walden so important for Thoreau? Perhaps students will let you read their papers aloud. Using James Taylor's song, "Up On the Roof," which describes a perfect retreat in the middle of the city, can serve to drive the concept home in modern terms the students can easily appreciate.

There are other contemporary songs which may be used with Thoreauvian themes. I call the artists contemporary poets who are still speaking Henry's messages today. Time has not eliminated their urgency. I line up Thoreau's words with the songs. For instance, I'll play Carole King's "Simple Things" and Madonna's "Material Girl" and students compare and contrast these in discussion, then writing, in relationship to such Thoreau quotes as follow: "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone....A man becomes rich by making his wants few....Do not trouble yourselves to get new things, whether clothing or friends. That is dissipation. Turn to the old. Return to them. Things do not change. We change....The cost of a thing is the amount of what I call life which is required to be exchanged for it.... Somplicity, simplicity, simplicity!....Simplify, simplify!" The list of quotes which speak against the dangers of materialism and the simple

joys which may be found by everyone in nature are plentiful and profound, and today's young people need to hear them, and often. "My wealth is not possession but enjoyment." is more relevant now than when Thoreau wrote it during the early moments of the Industrial Revolution which started in the United States a few miles from where he lived, in the cloth manufacturing town of Lowell, Massachusetts. And there was the railroad coming right by the pond, bringing in the world's goods.

Other songs that I have used over the years include Jim Croce's "I've Got A Name," about the sense of identity we may have within the friendly, unique realm of nature, and of the pride that comes in what we are in spite of others trying to change us; Christopher Cross's popular "Sailing," about painting our dreams on a canvas and sailing toward that paradise; Diana Ross's "Theme From Mahogany," which challenges listeners from the start with the same hard questions Thoreau had to grapple with--"Do you know where you're going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you? Where are you going to? Do you know?"; Three Dog Night's "Out in the Country" warns of what will happen to our environment; USA for Africa's "We Are the World" captures the spirit of Thoreau's civil disobedience as it urges people out of their apathy to do something for others who need deliverance; Frank Sinatra's "My Way" is a good reminder of the courageous individualism of the man from Concord. And, perhaps even more effective is having students type up the lyrics to songs they've found speak Thoreauvian themes now. Approved by the teacher and shared with the class, much good discussion can ensue. Students have always thanked me for this approach. It bridges the time and cultural gaps that put Thoreau on a dusty shelf of their minds.

Have students choose one of Thoreau's quotations and use it on a poster which creatively expresses the concept. The posters can be explained in front of the class and hung up. Students might also do mobiles or statues or paintings or display boxes or any creative response along this line. Poster collages seem to bring the nicest results.

Students might work together researching and blueprinting and building a scale model of Thoreau's house. There would be the appropriate furniture inside. I cannot tell you the interest that is generated from this tangible project. Also, overhead models of Walden Pond and Thoreau's Concord are worthwhile. These projects take time, but are well worth doing once if the teacher may keep the projects for following years to show other students.

I visited Concord and collected all sorts of visual aids which I combined with machine copies of what I found in books in making two albums which have proven invaluable. One album is entitled "The Thoreau Family Album" and has pictures of Henry at various ages, pictures of his brother and sisters, of his mother and father, of his close friends, and of the various houses his family lived in. It is especially interesting to point out casually that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne were friends. This album adds so much of a crucial personal nature to the students' view of Thoreau, and helps to erase the traditional and unfortunate image of Thoreau as a rebellious hermit, entirely opposite the truth of the man's life.

The other album has pictures of Thoreau's Concord, of other homes he visited of his friends, of Walden Pond, of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery where he and his famous writer companions are buried on Authors' Ridge, pictures of the original furniture from his Walden house, pictures of one

of the three replicas of his house which now stand in the Concord area, pictures of Rollie Robbins, who discovered the original house site in 1945, pictures of what the house site looks like today, examples of Thoreau's manuscript writing, the title page from the original Walden which includes the drawing of his house his sister Sophia made, sketches that others drew of Henry's house after visiting it, a picture of his journals kept in the case which he had built, as he had built some of his own furniture for the house, and a picture of the house he and his father had built the year before he had gone to Walden, giving him the architectural experience he needed. The effort of collecting the pictures and labeling them for the students will be rewarded by student interest.

Students may be taken to the woods or a pond or lake near the school for a special activity. They might have to spend twenty minutes to an hour alone there, returning to class, or waiting for homework, to record what was experienced. Students are so afraid of inactivity and silence. It is an important lesson to force them to be alone with their thoughts, to notice the unfounded fears replaced by quiet and peace.

Students might be taken on a walk and, during stops, or exclusively while sitting at a halfway point, hearing Thoreau quotes about the out-of-doors, or the value of nature and walking.

If outside, a very nice finishing moment is to have each student take up a rock or stone and place it in a pile, a point of remembrance similar to the tradition at Walden Pond where each visitor adds the same to a memorial rock cairn. You might explain the history of that tradition.

I have found much success with living history, with me or students portraying Thoreau or his mother. A script may be used. Of course, there is also the popular play, The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, which gives life to Thoreau and Concord, and which is quite inexpensive for a class set, available from Bantam Books.

Other literary items worth mentioning include E.B. White's essay on Walden and Woody Allen's very funny, "A Brief, Yet Helpful, Guide to Civil Disobedience."

In terms of reference sources, no teacher should be without Dr. Walter Harding's definitive biography, The Days of Henry Thoreau (New York: Dover Publications, $8.95 in paperback); and a book filled with pictures and Thoreau's own words, broken down into chapters about the most important and interesting aspects of his life, A Thoreau Profile, by Milton Meltzer and Walter Harding(Concord, Massachusetts: The Thoreau Foundation, Inc., $5.00 in paperback) is a natural teacher tool.

There are so many other ways to make Thoreau interesting, I will save time and space by providing an overview of the rest.

Have students maintain a scrapbook filled with newspaper and magazine and other examples from television and home life, of contemporary issues which come right out of Thoreau's works.

Have students keep a journal just the way Henry did, although he kept his faithfully for twenty-five years.

Have students study Thoreau's style closely and then try to imitate it, by vocabulary, sentence length, imagery, and so forth.

Play an environmental record in the background and have students write. Their free expression might then be read aloud with the same natural sounds playing. Or, cassette record a natural location nearby and use it in the same way; or, read Thoreau excerpts with the special, natural effect. If you, or a student, can play a flute, as Thoreau did very often at Walden, render an appropriate song outdoors or with the recorded sounds, perhaps interspersed with Thoreau's words.

Have students write a class poem together about society or nature or Thoreau or civil disobedience. Group poems work, too.

Have the students write about a topic Thoreau used. Have them discuss it, list the problems suggested and possible solutions. Then, after their final papers are in, reveal the fact that Thoreau wrote about the same issue. Read his essay together. Students may realize quickly how well Thoreau could express himself. Read several student papers in an encouraging way side by side with Thoreau's essay. Did Thoreau cover any ground that students overlooked, or vice-versa?

Have students make a time line of their own lives, beginning with birth, and a future dotted line, a projection of what they hope life will bring. Use Thoreau's quotation, "If you have built castles in the air your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." What does he mean? Why is it a critical concept for anyone who has ideas for the future? Also, discuss what Thoreau gave as his reason for going to Walden Pond, using the famous quotation that appears on a plaque next to the house site at Walden: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately..." If Thoreau were making a time line, what is it that he is feeling and thinking here which adds a sense of downright seriousness to his plans? Do we need to be this serious? What events on his time line brought him to such a dramatic expression?

Discuss Thoreau's famous "different drummer" quotation. Have students point out such individuals in their own school, community, nation, and world. What qualities make such a person? Why are such people important? What is dangerous about them? What is a danger to them for being such a person? Why are followers important? What care do followers need to take before choosing a leader? Was Thoreau a safe guide? Who are some leaders who have been followers of his (Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy)?

A last activity for a Thoreau unit is to have students write a letter to Thoreau. In this formal contact, they should tell the man what they think of his experiment, his philosophy, his life, or of something which was especially meaningful for them. Students may, of course,write letters to any author, particularly if you have included Thoreau with others such as Emerson and Whitman and Whittier. I am always surprised at how much students have actually gotten from the study, and how often they have their opinions so stabilized that they quite effectively disagree with some of Thoreau's thinking and offer very nice arguments as to why.

Finally, the last activity I will offer has met with much success. I have spoken to teachers who have been very enthusiastic about what it does for students. I call this final suggestion a Thought Dissection because it involves breaking apart one of Thoreau's boulders to analyze what is inside. While the activity has been used to study words of substance from other authors, it has been expecially effective with Thoreau's words.

Students are to choose one of Thoreau's quotations and write it at the top of their papers. Or, perhaps, the teacher will choose one for the class, or several they may choose from, that suit his purposes. You might want to have them leave some space, however, at the top, if you will ask them to entitle their dissections later, which I have found to be a very nice touch.

The next step is to write a paragraph explaining what the quotation means.

In a second paragraph the students create an example from everyday life, or recount a real one, which drives home the author's main point.

For better students, a third paragraph can be the explanation

of how a specific literary work or literary character they've experienced demonstrates the same main idea as the quotation.

The final paragraph would be an explanation of the value of the main idea to society and in one's own personal life.

Here follows an example of a Thought Dissection. It has a title, the quotation by Thoreau, and four paragraphs of explanation, example from everyday life, literary example, and social and personal value:

Much Hurry, Much Worry

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."
--Henry David Thoreau in "Economy," Walden

Most human beings live lives that are characterized by silent haste, resulting in frustration, tension, and little satisfaction.

Bob heard the warning bell for school when he was two blocks away. He joined twenty other students in various states of undress and anxiety as they scrambled, without a word, to make it to homeroom before the final bell. They rushed headlong with quiet screams of conformity, like Pavlov's dogs.

Huck Finn, adolescent protagonist in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, decided to escape the clutches of social conformity by slipping off to the freedom of the river. He refused to be civilized. Religion, school, and etiquette were some of the fingers wrapping themselves around his throat. He sought freedom with a companion who also very much needed the safety of the river, the slave Jim. Both found temporary relief from the desperate attempts of others to make them conform.

Henry Thoreau's words serve as a mirror to our society. We must slow down and examine our demands on one another. In his "Conclusion," Thoreau asks our society, "Why are we in such desperate haste to

succeed and in such desperate enterprises?" I must look closely at my own life. How does it reflect the desperation of Thoreau's observation? Why do bells make me jump? Why do I rush everywhere at school and at home? How do I fit into this system? Do I want to? What are the risks in nonconformity such as Thoreau represented? Are there comfortable avenues of escape if I need them, like Huck's river? Perhaps Thoreau has a special insight when he says that we will not find health of mind or spirit except in nature. That may be what I need.

These, then, are twenty-two tools I offer to my colleagues in your efforts to take Thoreau's boulders into the classroom, able to reduce them to size for your students for easier handling. May your students discover the same rich veins of elements in these rocks of Thoreauvian philosophy as I have seen other students find after diligent searching under the supervision of trustworthy guides.